

THE CUESTA COLLEGE NURSING PROGRAM AND THE NURSING SHORTAGE IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

According to local medical professionals, there are insufficient numbers of registered nurses to fill the existing vacancies in San Luis Obispo County's four hospitals (Arroyo Grande Medical Center, French Hospital, Sierra Vista Hospital, and Twin Cities Hospital).

ORIGIN

The Grand Jury chose to inquire into the nursing shortage in order to increase public awareness of the issue and to ascertain which, if any, remedial measures might be taken to alleviate the problem.

AUTHORITY

California Penal Code §933.5 states: "A grand jury may at any time examine the books and records of any special-purpose assessing or taxing district located wholly or partly in the county or the local agency formation commission in the county, and, in addition to any other investigatory powers granted by this chapter, may investigate and report upon the method or system of performing the duties of such district or commission."

METHOD

Grand jury members reviewed available literature on the nursing shortage and interviewed nursing and human resources managers at the four hospitals in the county, along with administrators of the nursing program at Cuesta College.

NARRATIVE

The nursing shortage was addressed in a *San Luis Obispo Tribune* article of November 3, 2005, which discussed an expansion of the number of nursing students enrolled in the two-year associate degree program at Cuesta College from 46 to 56.

The expansion was made possible by a \$15,000 donation from each of the four hospitals in the county, the Marion Medical Center in Santa Maria, the George Mee Memorial Hospital in

Monterey County, and the Cuesta College Foundation. Similar amounts have been pledged for next year (2007) to continue funding the expansion through the two-year associate degree program. The donations have allowed Cuesta to employ another instructor to accommodate the ten additional students. Ten additional nursing graduates every two years, however, will not eliminate the shortage in our hospitals.

Cuesta also plans to begin a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) training program, which will be one year in length. This program will be partially funded by a \$150,000 private donation from Compass Health. It will not significantly impact the nursing shortage locally, however, since only a limited number of LVNs work at local hospitals. Most are employed by nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

The nursing shortage extends nationwide, although it is particularly acute in California. Among the 50 states, California ranks last in the number of RNs per 100,000 population; and this in a state where 70% of RNs are the products of associate degree programs in community colleges, whereas in many other states emphasis is on baccalaureate degrees from four-year universities or programs of similar length in hospital nursing schools.

The number of young people entering the nursing profession has been steadily declining, and the nursing workforce across the United States is rapidly aging. One third of American nurses are more than fifty years of age, and nursing is a physically demanding profession.

The disinclination among young people to seek a career in nursing is not difficult to understand. Given the current low unemployment rate, many other jobs are available to those entering the workforce. Although the number of male nurses has increased in recent years, nursing remains a predominantly female profession, and young women today have a much greater range of career choices open to them than did their mothers and grandmothers. These factors, coupled with the demands of the job - shift work, weekend assignments, exposure to potentially contagious diseases, and the physical labor involved - compound the problem of attracting an adequate number of qualified people to the nursing ranks.

An additional factor in most parts of California is the cost of housing. Nurses or nursing graduates from many other states are reluctant to relocate to California, especially the coastal areas, because of high real estate prices and rental rates. In some areas of the state - Santa Barbara, for example - hospitals and educational institutions working together have addressed this issue by providing subsidized housing for nurses and other hospital employees.

Locally, salaries are also a concern. The average pay for a nurse with 20 years experience in one of the hospitals in San Luis Obispo County is \$37 per hour, while in San Francisco and Sacramento the rates are \$50 and \$60, respectively.

Hospitals have implemented various strategies to attract qualified personnel, such as sign-on bonuses and relocation reimbursement for nurses already employed by other entities. But these tactics merely redistribute the existing supply of nurses rather than increase it. In some instances, nurses have left one local hospital for another because of such incentives.

Traveling nurses are sometimes utilized by local hospitals to alleviate the shortage. These nurses may reside in other areas of California or in other states. They are employed by traveling nurse agencies, which assign them to requesting hospitals on a contractual basis for 13-week periods. The nurses are paid by the agencies and are also provided with living quarters or are reimbursed for lodging expenses. All of the costs are part of the contractual agreements with the hospitals. But this is neither a long-term nor a cost-effective remedy. Most traveling nurses prefer that lifestyle to a permanent position, especially since all their moving expenses are paid; and the cost to hospitals for a traveling nurse is approximately twice that of a full-time nursing employee.

Hospital monies might be better spent on programs intended to retain good employees. For example, retention bonuses might be offered to current employees rather than sign-on bonuses to new hires.

The working environment for nurses could also be improved where necessary. The use of Certified Nursing Assistants to reduce the RN workload could be expanded. Some of the

concepts associated with “magnet hospitals”, where nurses have a greater degree of autonomy and increased involvement in the decision-making process, might also be explored.

While San Luis Obispo County shares the nursing shortage with the rest of the state and nation, we are in one sense better off than many other areas. At the present time there is no serious recruitment problem here. Cuesta College, the only institution in the county offering a degree program for RNs, has a waiting list of qualified candidates, sometimes numbering as many as 200. Moreover, the vast majority of those on the waiting list are local residents, which mitigates to some extent the housing-cost issue as a negative recruiting factor.

Local hospital administrators would like to see Cuesta initiate a second concurrent nursing class, which could effectively double the number of RNs graduating from the college. This, of course, would require a considerable expenditure of additional funds. More money from the state in the form of grants, more from the state budget, more in the way of donations from local hospitals, or probably all three, would be necessary.

Money alone, however, will not eliminate the nursing shortage in the county. Adding a second RN class at Cuesta would require a substantial increase in the number of instructors, and according to program administrators there, such personnel are in short supply. Additionally, there is insufficient clinical space available to expand the program to any significant degree. The RN training curriculum requires that nursing students receive clinical experience working in acute care facilities, such as hospitals. The four relatively small hospitals in the county could not accommodate the increase in students resulting from a second class at the college without assigning them to later shifts, and Cuesta officials believe students need exposure to dayshift work when most of the hospitals’ activities take place. And there are no large hospitals or other acute care facilities within reasonable traveling distance where students can gain this experience.

CONCLUSION

The nurses training program at Cuesta College compares favorably with any other in California. Despite a change in admission requirements, which was mandated by the state several years ago,

Cuesta has continued to maintain a very low attrition rate for the program. For example, of the 46 students who began the 2004/2005 class, 44 are expected to graduate this year.

Local hospitals have expressed their satisfaction with the Cuesta graduates they employ - they would just like to have more of them. Their support of the college's program is evidenced by the donations made this year - and pledged for next year - to assist in funding the ten-student increase in the current nursing class.

The Grand Jury hopes that the spirit of cooperation between our practicing health professionals and educators continues, and that as a result of that cooperation, creative solutions to the nursing shortage can be found.

REQUIRED RESPONSE

This is an informational report. No formal response is required.